



# Implications of Year-One Work for Enriching the Educational Functioning Levels of the National Reporting System

**D**uring Year One, the EFF/NRS Data Collection Project conducted extensive field research that resulted in draft continua of performance for five EFF Standards: *Read With Understanding, Convey Ideas in Writing, Speak so Others Can Understand, Listen Actively, and Use Math to Communicate and Solve Problems*. In addition, teacher/researchers collected performance data for five additional Standards: *Use Information and Communications Technology, Learn Through Research, Take Responsibility for Learning, Solve Problems and Make Decisions, and Cooperate With Others*. Specifically, the Project

- trained more than 100 teachers in 5 states in developing instruction and assessing performance on the EFF Standards,
- developed a set of instructional and documentation tools that help teachers embed assessment in on-going instruction,
- collected more than 300 teacher-generated performance tasks for 10 EFF Standards, and
- analyzed performance tasks and descriptions of adult learner performances on these tasks to create draft performance continua for 5 Standards.

The data collected by the field researchers, using the tools described in the previous section, helped define the constructs and rich level descrip-

tors that contribute to the completion of the EFF Assessment Framework, which will include

- a developmental sequence of descriptions of learner performance on the Knowledge Base, Fluency, Independence, and Range dimensions of the EFF Performance Continuum for each of the 16 EFF Standards that can be used to guide learning and instruction;
- model performance-based assessments and scoring guidelines (rubrics), based on the Performance Continuum for each EFF Standard, that can be used to mark transitions from one level of performance to the next (for at least six specified levels to correspond to the current six ABE/ASE and six ESL NRS Educational Functioning Levels); and
- materials, training, and technical assistance to support the implementation of these EFF-based curriculum and instructional resources and assessment tools.

These elements of the EFF Assessment Framework provide a basis for enriching the NRS Educational Functioning Levels and for supporting valid and reliable measures of educational gain, using standardized alternative assessments by specifying characteristics of assessment tasks that can be used to collect and evaluate evidence of adult performance at various levels on the EFF Standards.

### **Defining Levels of Performance**

As in any educational assessment, the number of levels of performance specified and the definition of boundaries between levels is a matter of subjective judgment and consensus. There is no “measurement magic” that can reveal the “true” levels of adult performance. However, this does not mean that levels of performance on the EFF Standards cannot be marked in an empirically grounded and procedurally rigorous way. Through careful and recursive analysis of field-generated learner performance data and broad-based field and content expert review of level descriptions resulting from this analysis, we can construct a set of level descriptors for adult performance on the EFF Standards that can, in turn, be used to guide the development of assessment tools and scoring guidelines for reporting educational gains in the NRS. In this way, the EFF Assessment Framework will extend the range of assessment options available to adult education programs in measuring and reporting educational gains in the NRS.

The levels of adult performance that are marked out in the EFF Assessment Framework will be determined on both empirical/theoretical and practical grounds. The empirical/theoretical bases for determining levels of performance (and for developing specifications for performance assessments and scoring guidelines to benchmark levels of performance) consist of the field-based research and development processes described in the earlier sections of this report plus the content expert review, stakeholder review, and validation processes being conducted by the EFF Assessment Consortium. The practical grounds for determining levels of adult performance on the EFF Standards has its basis in the conventional system of levels of instruction into which students in the adult education and literacy

system are placed. The NRS levels (6 for ABE/ASE and 6 for ESL) reflect this conventional and institutional division of levels of achievement for students in the adult education and literacy system. The data gathered through the EFF/NRS Data Collection Project has come from adult education programs and from students who are classified within levels (courses of instruction) that correspond to the NRS Educational Functioning Levels.

By looking carefully at the characteristics of performance tasks and at the range of learner performances on tasks by adult students at different program levels corresponding to the NRS levels, we can create a rich picture of stages of learning and development on the EFF Standards that can be mapped onto the conventional levels of achievement reflected in student placement and in the NRS Educational Functioning Levels. In this way, we hope to provide a nuanced and explicit framework for development and selection of assessment tasks and for scoring and reporting student performance on the EFF Standards that will be instructionally relevant and, at the same time, reliable and generalizable enough (because it is linked to an explicit continuum of adult performance and to clear specifications for tasks and for scoring performance at points along the continuum) for use for high-stakes program improvement and accountability purposes.

### **Strengthening Instruction, Accountability, and Continuous Improvement**

The EFF/NRS Data Collection Project has also created a strong foundation for adult education system reform and improvement. The combination of professional development for a cadre of adult educators (who can, in turn, train others) and the development of tools (performance tasks and performance con-

tinua) that facilitate use of assessment data in monitoring and improving instructional practices has strengthened the capacity of adult education systems for accountability and continuous improvement. When teachers recognize the value of monitoring adult student learning, when they have appropriate and practical tools to monitor learning outcomes, when they are able to make use of learner performance data to improve instruction, and when they can accurately assess student progress and report learning gains, the promise of accountability leading to educational improvement can be realized.

Work on the development of the EFF Assessment Framework has been a complex and challenging endeavor. We have found that our original timeline for developing performance continua for the 16 EFF Standards has had to be revised as we identified more clearly the research, analysis, and validation needed to produce quality results. At the same time, we have become more aware of the value of the practical tools and professional development provided in the course of our development work. Through our experience in working with teacher/researchers in developing assessment tools and in providing professional development in assessment, we have seen that teachers have a better understanding of evidence and of the conditions for assessment, of the big picture of

Practitioners at EFF field research sites say that using EFF Performance Tasks to document student performance is influencing what happens in the classroom. Administrators and teachers tell us that teachers are

- thinking more about students' prior knowledge—what they bring to the learning environment from their previous experience—and planning in ways that will build on this prior knowledge;
- engaging students in thinking about their own learning processes—thinking about thinking—or metacognition;
- discussing cognitive and metacognitive strategies and their (teachers') need for more professional development in this area;
- thinking ahead in their lesson planning (What evidence of student performance do I expect to see from this activity? How will it be documented? What is the role of my students in helping develop the criteria for the evidence?);
- continually asking oneself if the activity is transferable and if it has real-life meaning; and
- focusing on the teaching process rather than on the product—or, put another way, facilitating student learning rather than teaching the “right answers.”

*(Summarized from Ohio teacher reports, 2000–2001.)*

assessment, resulting in a group of teachers who are better equipped to provide reliable data on learning outcomes. These interim results are critical to meeting the broadest goals of the EFF initiative as well as the NRS: continuous improvement of the adult education and literacy system. With continued commitment from our field partners and increased interest from other states, we are looking forward to seeing this work through to completion.